JONAH

By John Russell

Villainy, Vengeance and Adventure in the South Seas

WHEN first he was seen on Baliang he wore one leg of a pair of trousers and two weeks' growth of bristly gray beard and little of anything else. In this scant but patriarchal attire he appeared at the Rev. David Colhoun's evening service, where he fluttered the faithful Gilbert Islanders with mixed emotions. They peeped between their devotional fingers and shuddered at the shameless stranger who issued from the saffron sunset, somewhere behind the spiky line of the mission jack fruit trees.

The Rev. David Colhoun was not pleased.

For a terror dwelt on Baliang. License and pillage had ruled the peaceful isle all day, and rum had flowed like cocoanut milk. Back in the lagoon lay the ruffian ship of pirates and pearl poachers, who had come to rob and stayed to riot. The very singing of the hymns had been punctuated with the pinging of revolver shots. In this dark hour who should remain—aye, and did remain—the sole shield of his people against alien outrage? Who but the Rev. David himself?

No one had ever questioned the courage of the gaunt Scots missionary of Baliang. He had proved it that day. Three times he had faced the leader of the villainous crew of the Galloway Lass below and three times had won his point, single-handed, until even that great, dark, sleepy-eyed devil had given up trying to frighten him.

And here in his own chapel he stood ready for further defense, if need should be. But the stranger made no provocative move. He stayed clinging to a post, blinking in upon that silent and hostile gathering until, with a tardy start and an oddly deprecatory gesture, as if conscious for the first time of the place and the presence he had invaded, he sidled to the end of a bench and dropped there.

Colhoun's nervous hand caught up the suspense and cast it dramatically into his renewed petition.

He finished in a fervor that whipped the color to his gray cheek. The congregation recognized, perhaps, one word in ten—it is **not** easy to pray **ex** tempore in the Gilbert Island tongue—but they caught his drift quite well.

Earnestly, then, with simple eagerness that lent a sudden dignity and pathos to the effort, they lifted their voices in the final hymn. So they followed their pastor as he had taught them, stumbling the hard meaning, perhaps, but finding a subtler truth, bravely, one and all:

D'o num-'res hosts of mi-dy foes
D'o earth and hell my way op-pose,
'E save-ly leads me still a-lon',
Es lov'n k-ind-'ess, oh 'ow stron'.
'Es lov'n k-ind-'ess, 'Es lov'n k-ind-'ess,
'Es lov'n k-ind-'ess, oh 'ow stron'.

* * * *

THEREAFTER under the benediction they broke up, hurrying away each man of them to bar his hut and lie hid until morning.

"Amen!" they murmured one to another, to complete the rite as they understood it. "Ah—men!" "Amen!"

A shifting of shadows and they were gone, dispersed into the russet dusk, and had left the chapel empty—empty save for Colhoun and the lone visitor who had sat on the end of a bench and who echoed curiously, tentatively, to himself in a dry whisper:

"Amen! Amen!"

The Rev. David stepped down the aisle and spoke over at him. "What do you want?"

The man lifted a face like the shell of a nut, as brown and weather beaten. "Who—me? Nothin' much, mister, and no offense. I take it you're the lad as does the reg'ler missionaryin' here, ain't you?"

His voice was low and husky, and yet in other ways he hardly met the clergyman's rather academic concept of the spirituous as opposed to the spiritual state.

"This is my misson, yes. My church."

He turned his slow gaze around.

"An honest-t' heaven church? What? It don't look it."

"It was consecrated by a bishop," said the Rev. David, quite sharply, for he was touchy on the point.

"Bishop—eh?" The other seemed to extract an obscure satisfaction from the title. "Well, that makes it churchier, don't it? Mister, I been looking for a real church and a real preacher. I come a long ways lookin'."

"Where on earth do you hail from?"

"Mele."

"Mele? In the Marshalls? Two hunner miles!"

"With a bit of a proa—sail and paddle. I smashed her on the reefs gettin' ashore just now."

The stranger was silent a space.

"Mister, it comes hard to me to holler for help and I dunno' quite how to put the case, bein' rough and tough and not in your line. But one thing I'll make bold. About these here natives—Gilbert Islanders, we'll say, like your own—I want to ask you something that may sound queer."

"Well?" said Colhoun, marveling.

"Well—here's you whose business is good works for the black heathen, I believe, and here's me that never give them a thought except at so much per head, you might say. And what I want to know is this: Has a negro got a soul?"

Sitting there beside him on the bench the castaway listened in silence while Colhoun made his brief answer, speaking as was given him to speak in that moment, and for a time only the muttering diapason of the reef filled the prelude.

"A month ago I wasn't askin' favors," began the stranger presently. "I was doin' of them. Leastways I did when it seemed good business. I had a fine ship under me and a likely crew and you'd a' found few men between Nukahiva and the Pelews but would give me room as I needed it.

"I had a tip on a shipment of beche de mer that one of the native traders had been savin' up. The stuff is prime in the Marshalls—real tiger fish—and I had a chance for a turn if I could beat down his price. What made me all the keener, the very afternoon I got in, here come a dirty, little lop-sided ketch poking her sly nose up the passage. I wasn't goin' to have no Cooktown clam digger snaffle that cargo away from me, so I put quick to shore.

"But I couldn't find my trader. An old beggar party on the beach told me he lived on Vatu, a flea-bite of an isle some miles off. I figgered I could leave my mate to set up and overhaul some needed repairs whilst I chased right after that beche de mer.

* * * *

"WELL, I done it. I had my boys sail me over in the whale boat, there bein' no proper anchorage for a schooner yonder, and I told Farwell—that was my mate—he sh'd send 'em back again after me the next day. But he never did. And they never came. No, they never. And I would think it the less strange but that Farwell, my mate, and every other man of my crew, white or black, should have been the sacrifice. For what had they done compared with me? And yet I buried them, the few I could find of 'em after, in the coral sand by the water's edge. . . . They'd been shot to pieces as they lay——

"I landed on Vatu along in the afternoon. I walked up from the lagoon and there wasn't a living creature in sight nor any trace of the same.

"It looked queer; the boats were gone from the beach, the curing sheds were empty. Thinks I, maybe everybody's off on a big canoe festival, or elseway, and so I squatted in the shade till they should please to come home again.

"After a while I got the notion you get of somebody spyin' on y', and sure enough when I turned my head I saw a kid—just one. Maybe he was eight year old, a brown bit of a scamp peekin' from the doorway at me through his olly ringlets, clever as a mouse with his bright little eyes. I beckoned him over, but he whipped inside, and when I went after him he barred the door.

"Well, I seen I was stuck at Vatu for the day, anyhow, just me and the kid—and him so perk and sassy—and so I laid a reg'lar siege to catch that chap. So I took my knife and a bit of driftwood I found and set down to whittle a kind of jumping toy, which I hadn't done since I was a kid myself.

"I heard him stirrin' at the window, but I never let on, and pretty soon here he come sneakin' around behind me for a better look. I tossed the jigger to him and he made a dive for it and I near grabbed him, but he went up a tree smart as a squirrel.

"'You white fella mahrster,' he chatters at me, 'you get to the devil. Get to the devil 'long scrub,' he says.

"'Oh-ho,' I says, 'my bold buccaneer, you talk big for such a spry one. What name you so much fright?'

"'Me no fright,' he says. 'One fella man, me.'

"'Gammon!' I says, a-teasin' of him. 'If you're man why ain't you off with the rest of the bunch? All fella Kanaka he go fish, only pickaninny he stop home. Pickaninny, you.'

"'No fish!' he cries. 'Sick! Plenty strong fella sick. All fella Kanaka run like devil. You no run like devil, plenty soon you catch'm strong fella sick—my word! Close up you die altogether.'

"Sick, d' y' see, mister? Ah, that was it. He told me what had happened on Vatu. How a crew of strange white men had showed up around those parts in a little ketch; how they hired some native divers from Vatu and went grubbing the reefs after pearls and how two weeks before they'd put those unlucky divers back on shore again to die. Aye, mister—of measles. That was their pay, the big sickness that sweeps an island bare. Naturally the people had cleared like frightened rats, scattering for safety through the round about group—all except this one boy.

"'Me no fright,' he says. 'One fella man, me.' And by heaven, he was! He had stayed. Knowing quite well what it meant, he had stayed. And why? 'Father b'long me plenty too much sick,' he says. Because there was nobody else to look after his old man as was dyin' all alone in that house."

"But the boy was doomed," he cried. "Surely you should have seen that!"

"As you say, mister," returned the other. "I saw that quite well—for I nursed him the three days and nights."

The Rev. David sat very still in the darkness.

"I been a good deal amongst niggers in my time," resumed the stranger. "A nigger has always been a nigger to me, black or brown or pipe-colored. But that little kid now—he was different.

"He was sickenin' for it himself, of course, and even whilst he sat up there in the tree a-cussin' of me the fever was on him. But I couldn't coax him down. He was leary of white men, and perhaps he had reason. His father had been one of those divers, you see. Not a step would he come until I thought to walk away into his house, and then he came fast enough, all hands to repel boarders. He wasn't goin' to have nobody else touch his old man—not him! But he needn't a' worried. His old man was dead. . . .

"I think he must a' gone off his chump a bit after that. Toys he wouldn't look at no more; nor yet games didn't hold his sick-boy fancy. But stories, now——"

"Stories?" echoed Colhoun, for the other had checked on a sound like a stifled oath. "What kind of stories?"

"What kind would you think?" came the harsh response. "It seems a tramp missionary passing by Vatu had once preached from the white man's Book. That was the only kind of story he'd ever heard, and that was the only kind he wanted. He remembered the book bein' full of most wonderful matters. He remembered.

"Bible stories, d' y' see, mister? He called for 'em. There he lay in the light of the lamp with the red flush on his sunken cheek and his eyes so bright and eager. He was dyin' and he wanted Bible stories. And me—me, I didn't know any!"

"'Not the few that count?" whispered Colhoun.

"How should I know, mister, what counts? Who was I to know? He asked for Bible talk, and the only single blame thing I could tell him——"

"Well?"

"D'y' want to know? Jonah! Aye, it sounds like a poor sort of jest, don't it now? But it wasn't to him, nor yet to me—worse luck—nor to me. I told him the story of Jonah. Not as you would likely tell it, and how far off from what's writ in the Book I'd be afraid to think. But he liked it. He made me tell him over and over. And at last I was telling him again one night as he dozed.

"'Now the word of the Lord come unto Jonah,' I says—recallin' that part quite pat as I heard it the once from a Navy chaplain—'Now the word of the Lord come unto Jonah,' I says, and the rest in beche de mer lingo, and when I looked at him where he lay on my arm—why—he was gone, mister."

"Well—I got back. Too late; and when I seen the whaleboat would never come, I managed to fit out a half-built proa from the canoe house, and with that I worked my way back to Mele.

"It was like I said. Those strange white men had simply jumped my crew in the dark and murdered them and made off, and what else about it none could say, or ever will. A clean sweep and a finished job. It's done, and I'm done, and that's all."

"Never think it," said the Rev. David standing and swaying in a rapt renewal of faith. Never believe it! Heaven's purpose does not fail us so. Is yon little brave brown child to have died in vain? Shall they not answer? Yea, whosoever and wheresoever they be—even as that man below whom I fear no longer for a' his wicked triumph—even as he must answer in due time—even as Cap'n J. Jeffrey o' the Galloway Lass!"

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MEANWHILE the pearl-poaching skipper of the Galloway Lass was doing his own waiting, by his own beliefs, and packing the schooner's deck like a big caged cat. He wanted to be gone, he had all a highwayman's furious eagerness to be gone, and delays still clogged his purpose.

"And besides there's somethin' making," observed for perhaps the tenth time the lank youth who had served as mate. "Somethin' making and you can take your colonial oath. Feel that air?" He wet a bony forefinger and snapped it nervously. "Like gum, it is. We won't be leaving this tide."

"You mean you hope we won't," corrected his chief, never so amiable as when he was raging. "I can't blame you, Gunny, my lad. If we get a breeze you'll have to sweat sail on her all by your precious self."

He moved a pad-foot nearer and Gunny winced and shrank.

"Oh, you needn't get your monkey up. I ain't said no—'ave I? Didn't I take your side when the rest was clamoring to be off the cruise two days ago? I wouldn't stand in when they wanted to cross you."

"Ah? And why?"

"Jump the only man we got that knows 'ow to navigate," protested Gunny, eagerly. "Not me! 'Leave it to him,' I told 'em. 'E ain't no ways more anxious than us to swing; and ain't 'e due to swing the first of all if once we get shopped? Just put it to 'im respectful like, that we won't take no more risks, and leave 'im to run the show,' I says. ''E'll see reason.'"

"And did you say so, Gunny??" purred the skipper, with his sleepy-eyed smile. "Well—well—here's loyalty." In the hand of his sash hung a little double-ended bag of fine cocoanut fiber that gave the faintest tinkling music as he ran it through his fingers. "Now just for that—what will you have? A fistful of beanties like these? A hatful of Chile dollars? Name your will and say your pleasure, my lad. You shall have your pick from our very next haul—within twenty-four hours!"

Gunny's jaw dropped.

"You're going on with it?"

"I'm going on."

Prompt as at a cue there rose a sudden hail from overside that brought them both around, tensed.

"What's there?" called the skipper.

"Cap'n," came a voice. "Cap'n"—quiet and mysterious out of the leaden gloom that foreruns the dawn. "Have you room for an extra hand, Cap'n? Here's a man to work his passage."

"A man—what kind of a man?"

"A white man—an able man."

"And what kind of a passage?"

"Anywheres at all, so long as it's off this ruddy beach," was the calm reply. "I just heard there was a ship here. Wherever you're goin' is the place for me. And if you want to catch this tide—there's a whiff of breeze stirring now. Come aboard, sir," he added, as he stood on the deck.

Then the skipper threw back his head and laughed wide over the water, for it was true a warm breath fanned his cheek and the schooner had swung on the first of the ebb.

"Self-acting crimp!" he chuckled. "That settles it. I couldn't ask better. All hands——" he cried. "Heave short and stand by to break out. Gunny!"

He found the mate creeping up behind and nailed him there at a grab. Hag-ridden by his fears, the creature had whipped up a degree of despairing courage.

"You can't do it," he stammered. "You daren't try! My Gaw, we ain't fit—a ship like us on an errand like yours! I tell you there's a fearful time brewin', a fearful blow; so dark and thick and steamy it is. Wot kind of shape are we with all we got hangin' over us—wot kind of a 'oly captain are you—to risk a reckonin' now in storm and big waters? And besides—" He gulped. "The glass! D' you know—d' you know where it is? . . . Down below 29.85 and still fallin'!"

"I know," said the skipper, grimly.

* * * *

THE Galloway Lass might once have been the trader of the isles she purported to be; her look belied it as the faintly lightening day revealed her, with rigging set slackhanded and anyhow, her decks a sloven litter of filth, loose cordage and empty bottles. All about her main hatch was strewn a mess of rotting pearl shell, and here and there lay an outsprawled figure—as if these too had been left to yield some potential gem only through corruption. Their faces showed putty-white with soot-ringed eyes, sly and cruel.

Straddling wide-legged on the deck, looking down from knotted black brows and lowered lids, the skipper passed them in contemptuous review. And there he made his defiance of them: of chance, of events, of all checks and bars—the unconquered embodiment of evil and evil will.

"I'm speaking to you," he said. "This cruise goes through, weather or wind or crew as may be. It goes through and all heaven or hell can't stop it now. Tyree, Molloy, Silveira—and you over there, whatever's your beach-combing name before I sign you on with a boot's end—you hear me? Jump!"

They jumped.

With a racing tide and a hot, puffy wind out of the northwest that made he sails to bulge like fat cheeks, the Galloway Lass shot the narrow passage and stood off to sea.

The skipper made his first concession when he relaxed to wipe away a stinging blink of sweat and summoned Gunny with a jerk of his head. . .

"You that's so clever at the glass," he said, with an unwonted rasp, "hop below and see what it reads now."

The unfortunate mate, who seemed to move in a state of stupor, went limply sliding and dangling to obey. A moment later he crawled up the companion again and clung there making lip talk against the wind until his chief impatiently called the nearest hand to the wheel and stepped over.

"I said, where'd you shift it?" piped Gunny.

"Shift what?"

"The aneroid."

The skipper dived past into the cabin and presently returning took him softly by the neck and pulled him backward.

"If you did that——!" he began.

But Gunny's fluttering lids covered no secret this time.

"My Gaw, wot should I do it for? I come to look like you said—and the thing ain't there! That's all I know."

"If anybody thinks he can make me turn back that way he's due for a shock," said the pearl-poacher.

They had more to puzzle them ere long. Far and clear of all weather breaks in the coral group the schooner had now to labor the great ground swell and she met it but sluggishly. Too sluggishly. They learned why when Gunny, dispatched on another errand, came staggering aft with the sounding rod.

"A foot an' a half," he cried. "And makin' fast!"

His chief turned a convulsed face on him and would have struck him to the deck, for half the men had heard, but just then a black squall sent all reeling and, while they scrambled in the wash, with a rending jar the main top-mast snapped short.

Bedlam broke with an uproar of panic voices, of slatting canvas and plunging seas, until the skipper's bellowing challenge mounted it, until he sprang on the man at the wheel and plucked him off.

"Gunny!" he called presently, in a changed and hurried tone. "Gunny, see here."

The mate brought up in his grip.

"What's been the course?"

"Why, west by south ain't it?"

"Will you tell me what you see on that card?"

And Gunny looked, and had reason to look, (for within some short interval running close-and-by on the one tack the Galloway Lass had managed to swing through nearly one hundred and eighty degrees and was now scooting back on her tracks—that was the impossible thing the compass said.

Gunny swept his hopeless, haunted gaze about the curtained ring of sea.

"We're done. Something's queered it. Something's queered the whole craft—us and her and the whole show I knew 'ow it would be, along of all this cross-work. It's a curse on us!"

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BUT the skipper had caught from the deck a blown strand of small rope and was thrusting it at him and speaking short and thick.

"Something — something —? How about this? It's the lanyard—the lanyard from that top-mast back-stay. Cut! She didn't give, she was cut! Something queered us?" The blood congested in his swarthy cheek. "Somebody, you mean! Somebody did that, somebody crabbed the glass and faked the card with an iron. Somebody's queered us—and by the holy cripes somebody's going to die for it!"

A commotion forward among the crew arrested his questing glance and following their lifted faces he stared aloft upon a singular sight.

As if the ship had been one gigantic candelabrum, from every point of her rigging pallid, ghostly flames were weaving upward. Each mast and spar was tipped with them, and at the center of the display, in the cross trees, sat the hand who had climbed there to clear away the raffle of the broken top-mast. His head was bare and around and over him the spectral fluid played like a nimbus so that his hair stood on end and the very tips of his fingers crackled with it. The schooner wallowed on and still those unearthly fires wavered about her in will-o'-the-wisp ribbons, and still the man wrought calmly at his task.

It was all too much for the craven lot of the Galloway Lass. Their wailing rose along the decks and they cowered. All but Gunny; Gunny, with his sharper trick of vision, who stabbed the air.

"That's the man!" he yelled.

"Hey?" said the skipper, blinking, and shook himself together with a brutal oath. "It's only the corposants, you damned ass. Natural enough. Did you never see an electric storm a' shipboard—?"

But Gunny's claw sank into his arm.

"I'm tellin' you that's 'im—that's your man—the somebody you're lookin' for."

"What!"

"Look at 'im now."

And so the skipper did, and so did all the crew. They glared at the hand in the rigging.

He had finished his job and now lowered himself soberly by the shrouds until he was half way down, and there, suddenly aware of their fixed regard, he stopped. He stayed on the ratlines, peering through at them, a squat, stubble-bearded, somewhat shrunken little fat man, garbed in a complete but very ill-fitting suit of rusty blacks, whereof the coat was buttoned straight to the chin—the unmistakable sign of a clergyman the world around.

"What are you doing in those shops, my lad?" the skipper asked pleasantly. "Never tell me it's your trade."

The man above stood there with tag ends of the garments flapping about him in the wind.

"No," he said. They was loaned to me."

"Ah? What for?"

"To wear aboard this craft."

"And what for that?"

"So I could wreck her," said the stranger, calmly.

"So I could bring you to answer," he continued. "For Baliang, for Mele, for Vatu—for all crimes and all the wrong you done in those islands and meant to do. For my men you killed, my ship you stole—for the sake of all the poor souls, black and white, against your score. And answer you will. You'll never find that leak, for one thing—I know the poor old girl too well, you see—and for another, the riggin's all cut and slashed . . . your piratin' cruise is ended here, you big, bloody-handed murderer, for you and all your outfit!"

The crew swarmed at him in a snarling pack.

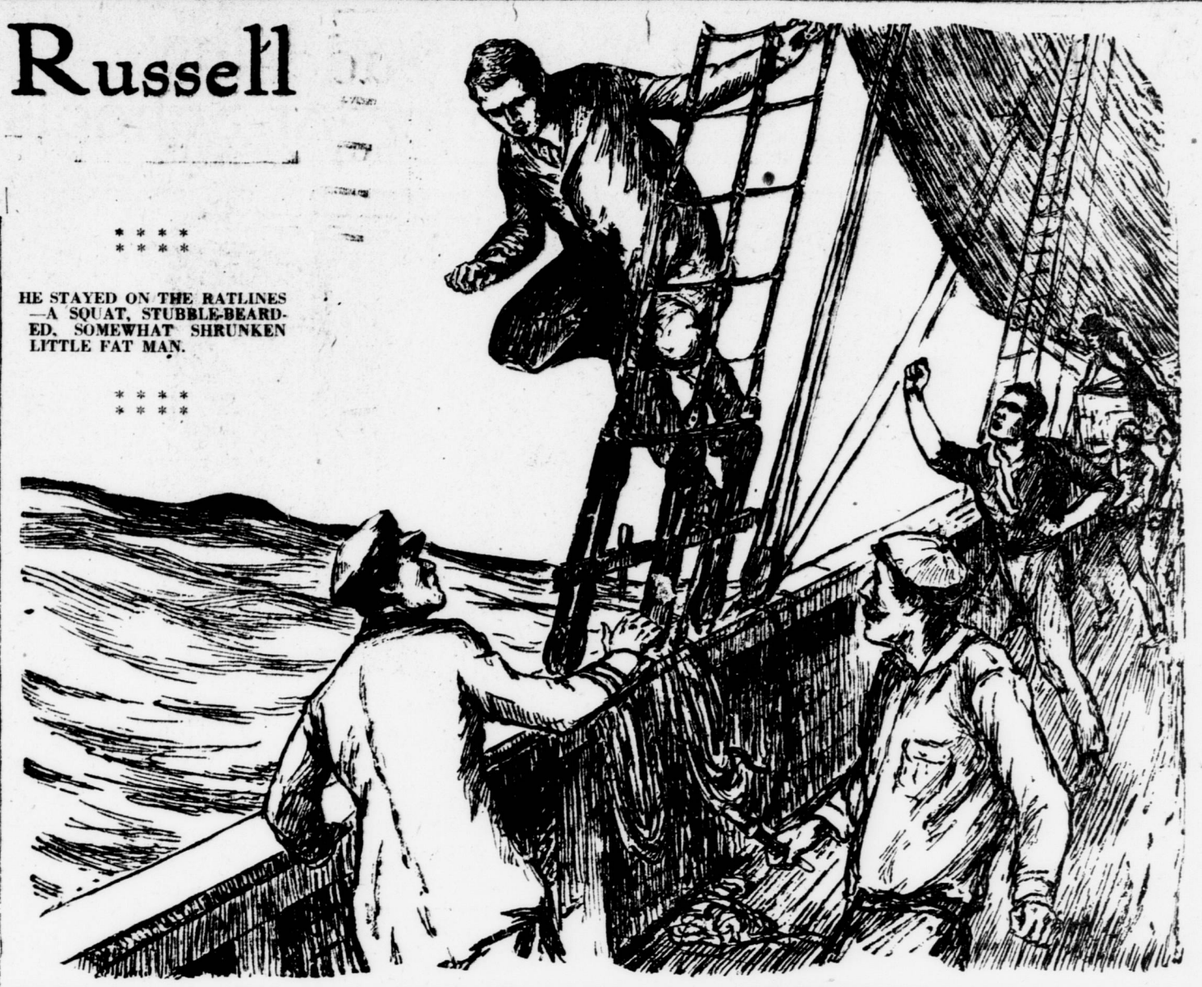
"Chuck 'im over! Smash 'im—drown'd 'im!"

The skipper took a step on the shrouds, looking up, and his teeth were bared to the gums.

"Will you come down?" he purred in his throat.

The other did not stir.

"Well," grinned the skipper, "I'll be most highly pleased to fetch you." And he began to climb.



HE STAYED ON THE RATLINES —A SQUAT, STUBBLE-BEARDED, SOMEWHAT SHRUNKEN LITTLE FAT MAN.

HE was part way up with one hand reaching for a ratline when the vessel swung over on the next deep swell—and in that instant the man above merely dropped on him. Dropped like a blotchy black spider from a web to his shoulders, about his neck, and wrenched him away in the impact. The two bodies fell grappled together, struck the channels with a shock that quivered through the ship, bounded off into the sea—and disappeared. . . . .

Not finally. The condemned crew of the Galloway Lass had one more glimpse of that deadly struggle, the last, dim adumbration of its closing gesture. Through the smother they discerned a huge bulky body floating half submerged, low and rolling in the gray spume. And there they presently saw, or seemed to see, two figures rise to a footing, giant and pigmy, and meet. But the pigmy must somehow have gained a decisive weapon, for he struck from a raised arm and the one that fell was the giant.

Then a great black shadow as of brooding wings swept through the upper air, the wind leaped shouting down, and they saw no more.

When next he arrived on Baliang he wore the garb of modesty, still sopping from the sea, but quite complete, and he carried a short, steel-tipped lance on which he bore as a staff. In this pilgrim guise he stumbled a painful and laborious way up the beach among the jack-fruit trees, many times pausing, leaving an errant track in the coral sand, but at length appearing in the strong morning light at the site of the Rev. David Colhoun's mission.

And the Rev. David himself was making his final plea and one without hope for a beaten cause, when he was aware that he had lost the attention of his audience.

Entered to him and to them the stranger, and while they gazed at him with bulging eyes, dropped heavily on the end of a bench.

"You——!" gasped the Rev. David. "Man alive—how on earth did you get back here?"

The stranger raised a face seamed and drawn.

"Who—me?" he said dully. "Easy enough. There was a whale——" He swayed and would have fallen but that Colhoun took him about the shoulders. "A whale," he said. "You remember? It's in the story, ain't it, mister? Only this one was dead, with the harpoon and the rope still to him."

"You came ashore on a dead whale!"

"Like Jonah. Leastways as he might have done, for that was the way it happened to me—you'll find mine out there on the reefs, what's left. You mind the way of it? 'Now the word of the Lord come unto Jonah,' it says. 'Now the word of the Lord come unto Jonah.' And it certainly did, mister, because that's me."

"How?" said Colhoun, pityingly. He feared to see a trouble in the blue eyes, but they were bright and clear, only very, very weary.

"Aye—Jonah. For so I am, and so I was christened, and Cap'n Jonah Jeffrey of the Galloway Lass is what I've been these many years. And by the same token I have to thank you, too, mister, and to pay——"

He braced his failing strength with an effort and, fumbling in the breast of his coat, drew out a little double-ended bag of fine coconut fiber that made the faintest tinkling music as he placed it in the pastor's hand.

"The pearls!" cried Colhoun. "The pearls o' the mission!"

"And now you'll be buildin' that church, won't you? An honest-t'-heaven church, as you meant? And maybe—maybe a school for the little kids as well—what? To teach 'em. To teach the little nigger kids, mister, that never had no chance and never knew no better, and give 'em what they need—the books and the stories and the good words——"

"And the songs?" asked Colhoun, gently, with a true instinct.

"Aye—and the songs."

Earnestly then, and eagerly at their missionary's signal, the faithful little group lifted their voices in the favorite hymn:

"D'o num-'res hosts of mi-dy foes,
D'd 'arth and hell my way op-pose.
'E save-ly leads me still a-lon',
'Es lov'n k-ind-'ess, oh 'ow stron'.
'Es lov'n k-ind-'ess, 'Es lov'n k-ind-'ess,
'Es lov'n k-ind-'ess, oh 'ow stron'."

"Amen! Amen!" breathed Capt. Jonah Jeffrey.

(Copyright, 1924.)

"AND AT LAST I WAS TELLING HIM AGAIN ONE NIGHT AS HE DOZED."

North Pole Discovered by Peary, U. S. Explorer, 15 Years Ago Today

Story of Remarkable Dispute Told by Witness

BY HUGH C. MITCHELL,
U. S. Coast and Geodetic Survey.

ON the sixth day of April, 1909, just fifteen years ago today, an American citizen stood on the top of the world and unfurled our glorious flag to the breeze.

The north pole, the goal of centuries of heroic endeavor on the part of intrepid explorers, had been attained, and to Robert Edwin Peary, officer of the United States Navy, belonged the great honor of giving to his country a new dominion—over ice and sea—and of standing, the first man, at that point on our globe where the breezes blow only from the south and where all meridians converge to a point.

While at the time of his discovery of the pole Peary was an officer of the United States Navy and was rewarded for his exploit by retirement with the grade of rear admiral, he was at the time also acting under instructions from the United States coast and geodetic survey—instructions relating to tidal and current work, in the fulfillment of which he carried a light sounding apparatus on the dash to the pole.

Whether or not Peary actually attained the pole was a subject of considerable discussion in the months following his return therefrom, a question hardly second to that other one, "Was he the first man to reach the pole?" prompted by one of the most remarkable incidents the world has ever witnessed. It was accordingly with a great deal of interest that the author embraced the opportunity of making a mathematical discussion of the astronomical observations made at the pole by Peary and en route thereto by Bartlett and other members of his party. Through this opportunity the author was able to determine definitely that Peary did reach the north pole, and that he was the first and only one to do so.

One day in the fall of 1910 Dr. O. H. Tittmann, at that time superintendent of the coast and geodetic survey, sent for me. I was then a geodetic and astronomical computer in that bureau. He asked me if I would care to undertake a mathematical reduction of Peary's astronomic observations at the north pole. It was a most unexpected question.

I had, like many other members of the American public, given only cursory attention to the contest, if I may call it by that name, which was then raging in the press relative to the discovery of the north pole; and, like many members of the same public, my sympathies were somewhat inclined, in a more or less sentimental way, toward Peary's opponent.

I knew neither of the men personally. Had I known Peary then as I was to know him later—as a man not only incapabe of fasehood himsef but also of even tolerating it in others; as a man in whose presence falsehood must at once wither and die—I would have been eager to accede to Dr. Tittmann's request. I did agree, however, to undertake the computations, but not with the enthusiasm which came after my first meeting with the famous explorer—an enthusiasm which became more intense the better I earned to know and appreciate the man.

When Peary returned from his last and successful expedition into the far north he reported his success formally to the National Geographic Society, his sponsor in the undertaking. That society immediately referred the report to its research committee, and the question of passing on the report was finally delegated to a subcommittee of that main committee. This subcommittee was composed of three men of unquestioned reputation in geographica science—O. H. Tittmann, head of the coast and geodetic survey; Henry Gannett, a geographer of the geogica survey, and Admiral Colby M. Chester of the United States Navy.

These three men met at the home of Admiral Chester, examined the records presented by Peary, took a look at his instruments and reported back to the society through the committee that Peary had discovered the north pole.

Bills and resolutions were introduced in Congress to provide federal recognition of Peary's accomplishment, and a reward in the form of retirement with the grade of rear admiral. These watters were referred to the House committee on naval affairs and placed in the charge of a subcommittee of that main committee. The chairman of the subcommittee was Thomas S. Butler of Pennsylvania.

Hearings on the Peary bills were commenced before this subcommittee on March 4, 1910, Dr. Tittmann being the first witness to appear. He was before the subcommittee only a short time when he was excused, as he was due before the appropriations committee in his official capacity as head of the coast and geodetic survey.

Dr. Tittmann was followed by Mr. Gannett, chairman of the National Geographic Society's subcommittee, who for several days answered a steady fire of questions put by members of the congressional subcommittee.

It was unfortunate that at that time certain contracts which Peary had with his publishers precluded his placing all his polar data without reservation before the congressional committee; but such an act virtually would have amounted to publication, and the same character of absolute honesty to which I have already referred as being, to me, Peary's predominating characteristic, prevented his breaking faith with his publishers, even for the coveted congressional honors. Hearings were therefore discontinued for an indefinite period.

I do not recall the exact date when I first met Peary, though I can never forget the event. I kept no diary of our meetings—A fact which I have often regretted, though, except to recall dates, a diary is hardly needed. The man, his rugged personality, his tremendous physical and mental force, his searching gaze, are still indelibly impressed on my memory. Every detail of that first meeting, as of

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